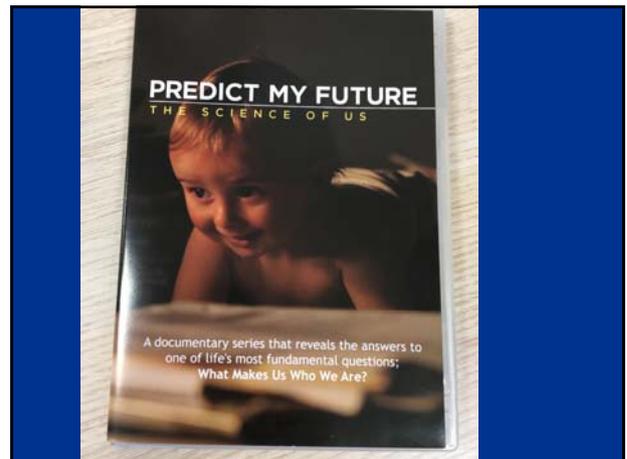


# The importance of childhood self-control for a prosocial, successful life

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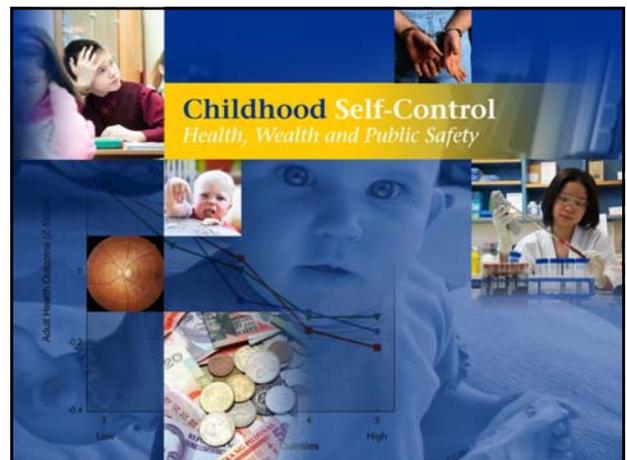



## Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Research Unit

Director  
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Department of Psychology  
University of Otago  
Dunedin, New Zealand

### Outline

- ▶ Why self-control?
  - The Dunedin Study
  - Predicting adult outcomes
  - Adolescent mistakes
  - Costs to society
  - Implications



### What is Self-control?

Self-control is the ability to regulate one's emotions, desires, and behaviours in the service of later rewards.

- Think before you speak or act
- Resist temptations
- Give considered response instead of an impulsive one
- Resist saying something inappropriate (or hurtful)
- Resist 'tit for tat' (hurting someone because that person hurt you)
- Resist jumping to conclusions

## Self-control:

Studied by all behavioural sciences

- **PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY** Conscientiousness, impulsivity
- **CHILD PSYCHOLOGY** Delay of gratification, difficult temperament
- **ECONOMICS** Inter-temporal choice, reward discounting
- **NEUROSCIENCE** Executive function
- **PSYCHIATRY** Inattention-hyperactivity
- **MANAGEMENT SCIENCE** Will power, self-discipline

## Why Study Self-control?

Childhood self-control predicts success and failure in adult life, above and beyond intelligence and family wealth



## Self-control:

More necessary today than it used to be?

- **AVOID OBESITY** in an era of ready food availability
- **MAINTAIN FITNESS** in an era of sedentary jobs
- **SUSTAIN MARRIAGES** in an era of easy divorce
- **PREVENT ADDICTION** in an era of access to substances
- **RESIST SPENDING** in an era of sophisticated marketing
- **SAVE FOR OLD AGE** in an era without guaranteed pensions

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## Measuring Childhood Self-control

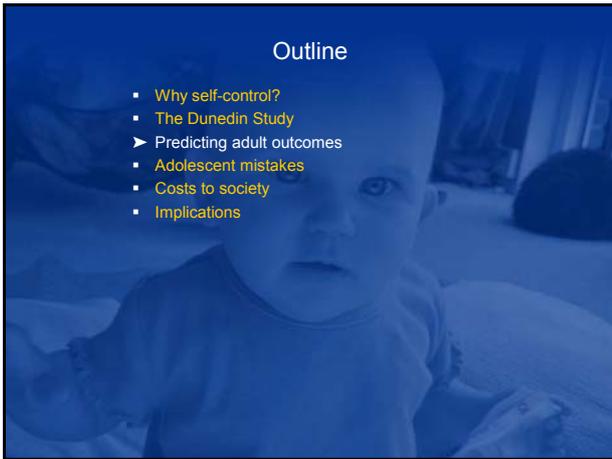
- **Predictor: A composite of ratings**
- **Persists across ages 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 years**
- **Agreed upon by multiple reporters**
  - Staff observations of child's self-control in the clinic
  - Parents' reports
  - 4 different teachers' reports
  - Child's self-reports



- ✓ Impulsive, acts without thinking.
- ✓ Can't wait his or her turn.
- ✓ Low frustration tolerance.
- ✓ Dislikes effortful tasks.
- ✓ Fleeting attention, easily distracted.
- ✓ Lacks persistence, easily forgets goals.
- ✓ Often goes for the risky thing.
- ✓ Requires constant attention and motivation from an adult.

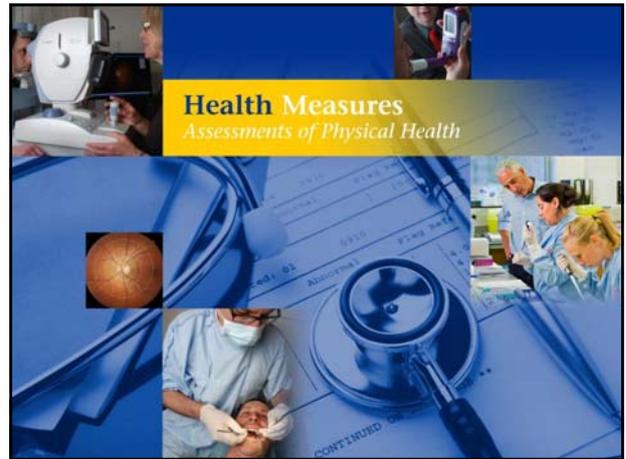
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### Health Measures

*Assessments of Physical Health*



### Cardiovascular fitness



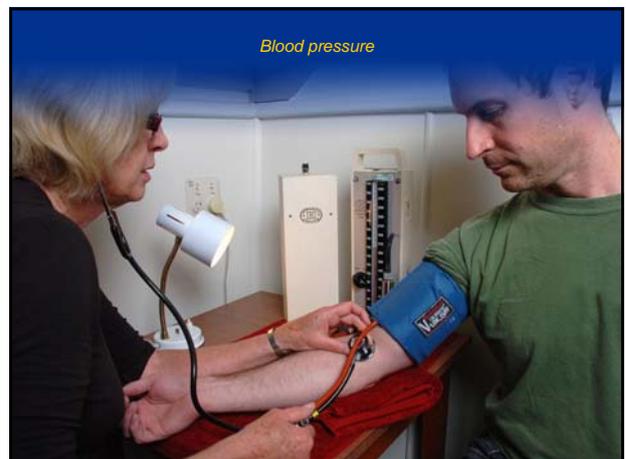
### Anthropometrics

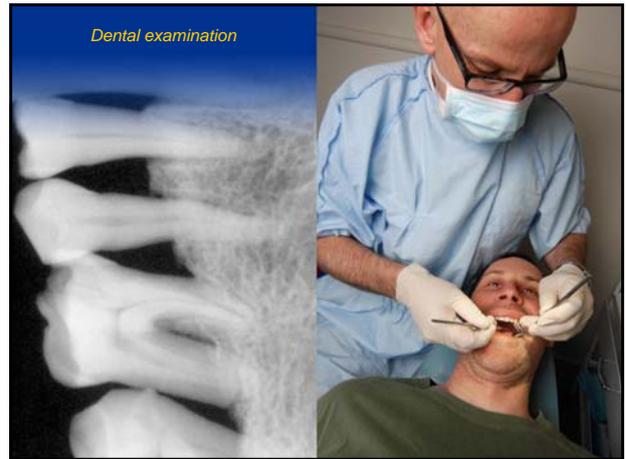


### Cardiovascular health



### Blood pressure





### Health Outcomes:

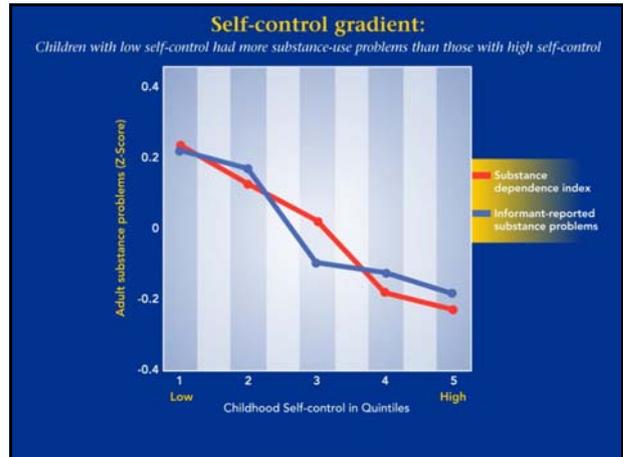
A count of clinical measures in adulthood

- Cluster of metabolic abnormalities (17%)  
- E.g. obesity, blood pressure, cholesterol
- Periodontal disease (20%)
- Sexually-transmitted infection serology (18%)
- Inflammation biomarkers abnormal (20%)
- Respiratory airflow obstruction (17%)



### Health Outcomes: DSM-IV substance dependence diagnoses in adulthood

- Tobacco dependence (19%)
- Alcohol dependence (8%)
- Cannabis dependence (5%)
- Harder Drug dependence (3%)
- Corroborated by informant reports



### Wealth Measures Assessments of Financial Success

### Adult wealth outcomes in adulthood

- Income in NZ dollars
- Occupational prestige



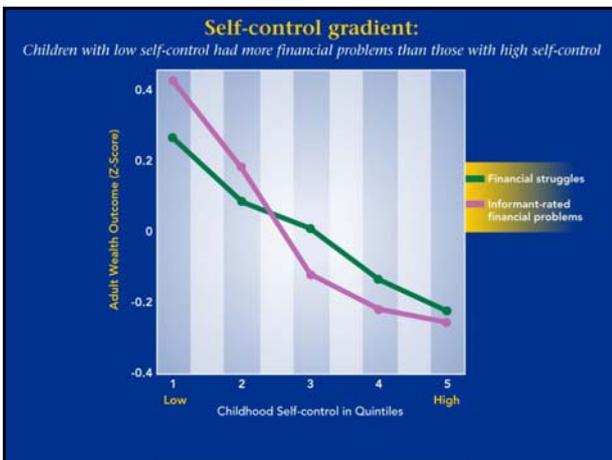
### Financial planfulness in adulthood

- Attitudes toward saving and saving behaviour
- E.g.
  - Is saving for the future important to you?
  - Do you save money by putting money away and not touching it?
- Financial building blocks
- E.g.
  - Home ownership
  - Investments
  - Retirement plan



### Financial struggles in adulthood: self & informant reports

- Money-management difficulties**
  - Do you find it difficult to meet the cost of...
    - Rent, mortgage
    - Phone or heating bills
    - Major repairs to car or house
    - Do you find yourself living paycheck to paycheck?
- Credit problems**
  - Turned down for a credit card
  - Sold belongings to a pawnbroker
  - Declared bankrupt



### Crime Measures

Assessments of Criminal Outcomes

### Criminal court convictions, age 18 to adulthood

New Zealand and Australian Police





- All analyses shown today controlled for four main alternative explanations...
- Gradients looked the same in
    - Children from high-income families
    - Children with above-average IQ
    - Girls
    - Children without ADHD diagnoses

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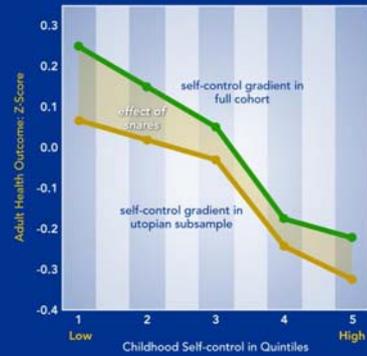


In the "utopian" subsample of the cohort who as teens...

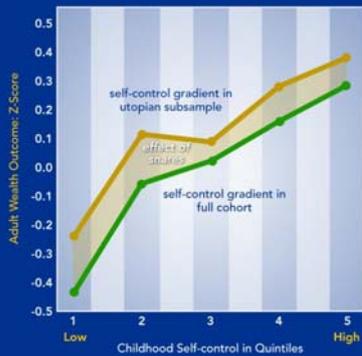
- did not smoke
- did not drop out of high school
- did not have an unplanned baby



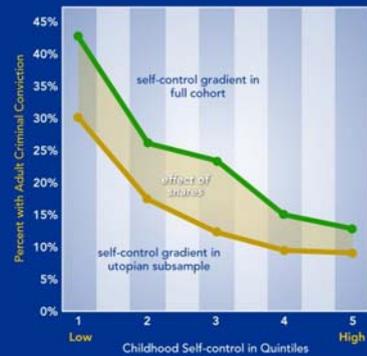
### Number of Health Problems



### Income

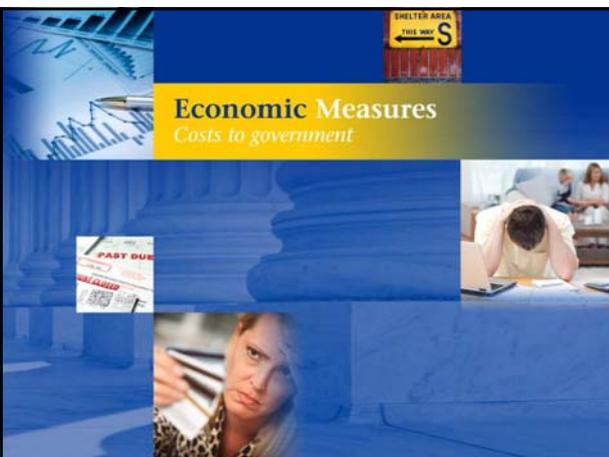


### Adult Crime



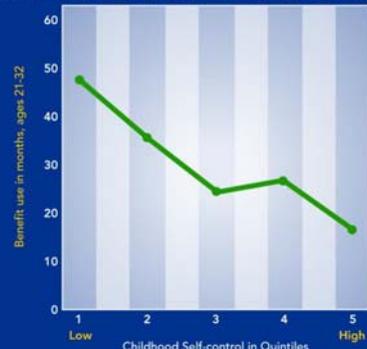
### Economic Measures

Costs to government

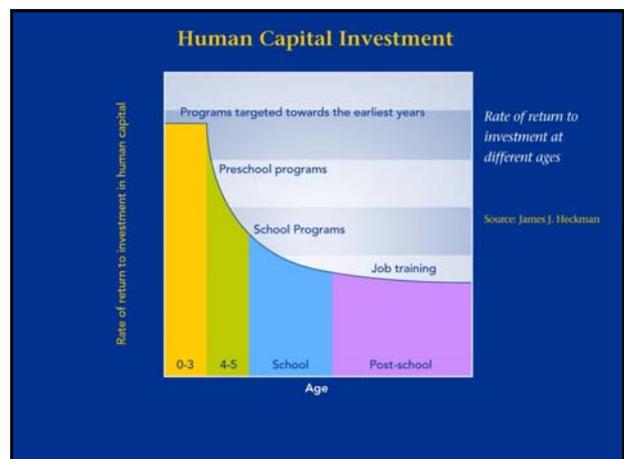
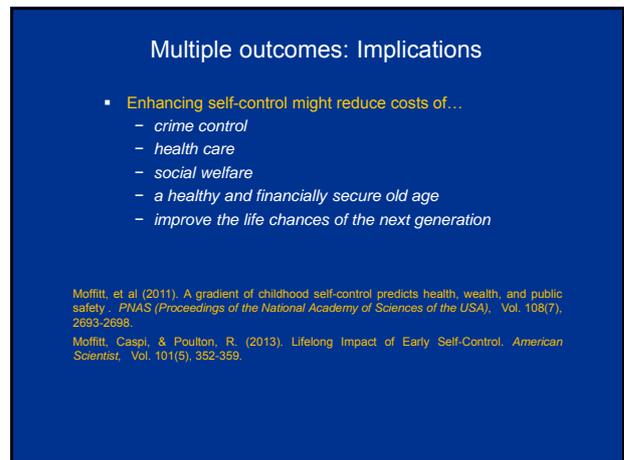
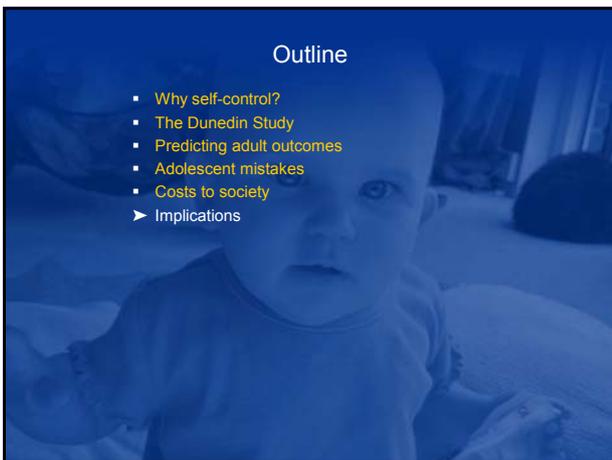


### Costs to Government

Poor childhood self-control predicts duration of welfare-benefit use in adulthood



Welfare-benefit use records are from the New Zealand Ministry of Social Development



### The self-control gradient: implications

- Targeted vs. universal intervention?
- Even children above average on self-control can benefit from better self-control skills
- Even intelligent children from well-to-do homes can benefit from better self-control skills
- The gradient implies universal enhancement



### Acknowledgements

- This on-going research would not have been possible without the co-operation and commitment of the Study members, their families and friends over a long period of time.
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For copies of research articles referred to in this presentation or other information on the Study, contact Jenny McArthur:

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[http://www.otago.ac.nz/dunedin\\_study](http://www.otago.ac.nz/dunedin_study)